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A GUIDE TO REPORT WRITING (BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES)

Federal Water Pollution Control Administration
Cincinnati, Ohio

April 1970

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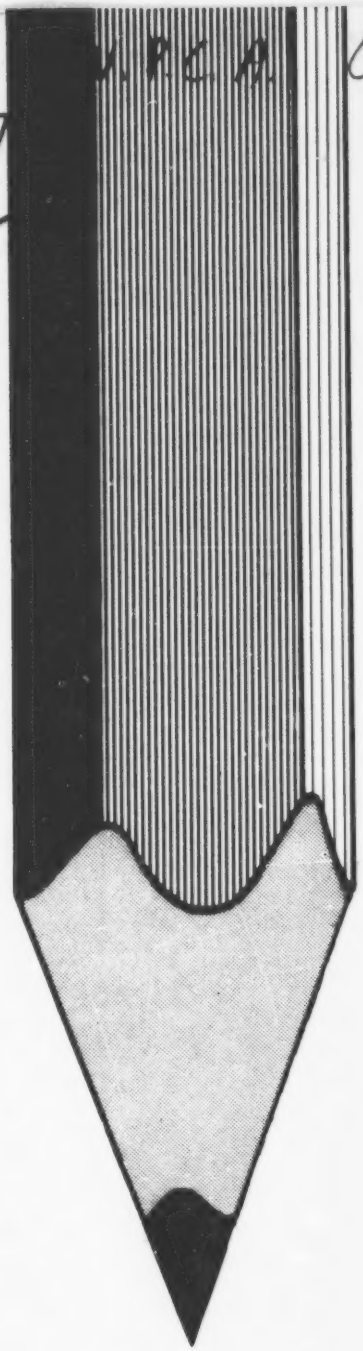

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FEDERAL WATER POLLUTION CONTROL ADMINISTRATION
OHIO BASIN REGION
CINCINNATI, OHIO

A GUIDE TO REPORT WRITING

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INTRODUCTION

It is important that all of us understand the structure of language and methods of finding accurate information. Only through the development of skill in communicating this information, can we be effective writers and present interesting reports to our readers. This guide is a ready reference for people who wish to express themselves clearly in writing, by seeking out the information about subjects which concern them.

In this guide, the approach is up to the reader - the writer of reports - who will write something that is rewarding to himself and his audience.

* * * * * *

WRITING FOR READERS

As you start to write ask yourself the right question. It is not, "How have we always done this?" Rather ask yourself, "What am I doing and what is the best way to do it?"

Of course much that you write goes to a number of readers with differing backgrounds. That makes the problem more difficult. But by giving it thought you will at least approach the ideal solution. Poor report writing comes from not thinking of the readers as human beings at all. Too many reports seem written solely for the filing cabinet. They depart far from the spoken language in prose that is pompous, dull and wordy.

The concepts in technical writing must often be complex, but the writer best able to hand them on to others keeps his prose simple. The reader has only so much energy, and he uses it in three ways: in understanding the words and symbols, in getting the relationships between these, and, last, in realizing the thought conveyed. Especially when the thought is complex, the writer must conserve the reader's energy for grasping ideas.

To help your reader, use simple words when you can and strive for short sentences with clear relationships. No matter how precise your words are, the writing fails completely if it doesn't communicate.

* * * * * * * *

AIDS IN ORGANIZING

The hard work in organizing any factual report consists of bringing forward the most important facts, shifting the less important ones into the background, and dropping altogether those not required in your message.

One reason this is difficult for a technical man is because he remembers his work in chronological order. He knows what he did first, second, third, and so on. But such an account is not well adapted to report writing. A report must be more than a simple record. It must make clear the significance of the work and how it connects with the work already done.

Think of your report as a conversation between you and the reader. Try to foresee his questions and answer them in the order that he would ask them. First a reader wants to know: What is this all about? Why were you doing this work? In general, what did you find out? What should be done about it? The perfect summary gives quick answers to all four questions.

One guide is to give brief answers to What? Why? and So What? before going on to How? and the details. The first section of the report is all that many will read.

Once into the body of the report here are other questions that may be helpful as guides:

What is the problem in more detail? This is a good way to start the body of a report.

What have others done about it? Give the background next.

How did you attack it? Briefly give your technical approach.

What did you work with? If this is an experimental approach, give the materials used in your study.

What happened? Tell the results.

What did you learn? Interpret the results in light of earlier knowledge.

Where does this bring us? Explain how the present work has affected the problem. Give recommendations for any future action or study.

Throughout your report be sure to give the reader all the background he needs to understand what you are telling him. He can best organize his thoughts from facts if you move from the general to the specific.

* * * * * * *

PATTERNS OF ORGANIZATION

There are four chief forms in which a set of ideas or facts may be organized.

The first pattern of organization is used for such records as the minutes of a meeting. Events are listed chronologically.

The second, the literary, serves best when your aim is to stir the emotions of the reader.

Deductive, the third form, is well adapted to argument or proof. One starts with the foundation facts then builds upon them step-by-step until the final deduction or proof is given.

The fourth form is the inverted pyramid. This form fits a technical report. You start at the base of the pyramid to give the big facts first and explain their meaning. You fill in the details as you expect your reader to ask questions.

Those who read what you write usually do so under pressure. They want to get your message as quickly as possible.

Furthermore, nearly all reports have a variety of readers. Some will be interested only in a summary of the outstanding facts and their significance. The busy supervisors who read your reports will be thankful if they do not have to re-read each page to get the information they require.

* * * * * * *

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As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park, and recreational resources. Indian and Territorial affairs are other major concerns of America's "Department of Natural Resources."

The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States—now and in the future.